DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 058 PS 018 010

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TITLE Parental Selection of Responses to Misbehavior: The Case of Physical Punishment.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 27-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Simulation; *Corporal Punishment; *Mothers; Negative Attitudes; *Parent Attitudes; *Research Design; Research Methodology; Research Problems
IDENTIFIERS Ambivalence (Psychology); *Context Effect; Positive Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Mothers' behavioral intentions about using physical punishment were examined to reveal influences on their selection of responses to child misbehaviors. Participants were 55 middle-class, mostly college-educated mothers of 3-to-4-year-old children. A total of 31 children were girls. Mothers operated a computer program which presented, in a random order, 12 common child misbehaviors. Misbehaviors, which occurred in public and private, concerned breaking rules, aggression, taking others' property, and temper tantrums. Mothers estimated how often their children engaged in each misbehavior and the likelihood that they would respond to their children's misbehavior with reasoning, a time-out, or physical punishment. A 30-item attitude questionnaire was used to assign mothers into attitude groups. Mothers were classified as having positive, ambivalent, or negative attitudes toward physical punishment. Findings indicate that for most mothers, both the distal variable of attitude toward physical punishment and the proximate variables of immediate considerations need to be studied if an understanding of parental behavioral intentions and behavior is to be reached. Findings also suggest that the relationship between distal and proximate variables is not necessarily isomorphic. (RH)

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Parental selection of responses to misbehavior: The case of physical punishment

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In T. Dix (Chair), Beyond belief: Information processing approaches to parents. Symposium conducted at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Kansas City, April, 1989.

PS 018010

* Laura Hoppenstein collaborated in this study and used it for her Honors Project in Psychology.

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Introduction

In this paper the "old style" parental social cognition research will be contrasted with the "new wave" represented by the talks in this symposium. The old style is indeed old as it first appeared in 1899, when a researcher, under the guidance of G. Stanley Hall, developed a questionnaire on parental use of punishment. Since the 1930s, that approach--the assessment of global parental attitudes--has flourish and scores of questionnaires have been generated for identifying well over 100 global parental attitudes, such as warmth, control, acceptance, and punitiveness. Despite a variety of substantial methodological and conceptual problems (see Holden & Edwards, 1989), those investigators have their hearts in the right place--the parents' mind.

Where researchers who rely on global attitudes have gone astray is in viewing the parent as trait-like, and parental behavior as determined solely by those attitudes. Attitudes, when assessed correctly, are indeed important, but they are only part of the story of how parental social cognition influences behavior. The rest of the story lies in the proximate considerations of the parent, some of which have been studied under the title of "child effects" (e.g., behavior, temperament), contextual considerations (public vs. private setting), presence of others (spouse, other children), or parental goals (short or long term) (e.g., Kuczynski, 1984; Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1982). Neither attitudes nor proximate considerations are sufficient; both are necessary to understand fully parental thinking and how it relates to behavior.

To illustrate this, I will examine parental responses to children's misbehavior in general and maternal reported use of physical punishment in specific. Physical punishment is a good behavior to examine for a variety of reasons. As a salient practice that is embedded in our culture, most parents have developed various beliefs about it--whether it be the primary positive belief that the technique is a good way to educate children, or the negative belief that spanking leads to aggression in children. Out of these beliefs grow attitudes or evaluations of the goodness or badness of spanking.

Physical punishment is also an important behavior to study for applied reasons. Frequent parental use of physical punishment has been associated with abusive parenting. Vasta (1980), in his two-process model of child abuse has argued that physical punishment can lead to abuse either as an emotional reaction, or it can lead to abuse by its overuse as an instrumental child-rearing technique (e.g., Parke & Lewis, 1981). Physical punishment will be considered here only as an instrumental parenting behavior.

Despite the attention that physical punishment has received both in studies of parental attitudes and studies characterizing parental behavior, little is actually known about why and under what circumstances parents use it. To begin investigating this area, I conducted extensive interviews with 30 middle-class mothers to understand their attitudes and beliefs. Based on that work, and other studies (e.g., Larzelere, 1986), it appears parents today can be divided into 3 unequal

groups: Those parents who have positive attitudes toward spanking and think it is a useful technique, those who hold negative attitudes toward spanking, and those who fall in between because they have mixed thoughts but believe it's ok to use sometimes.

But these general attitudes were not sufficient to account for the reported instances of use. In the interview study, the mothers' most common refrain to the question of when they use a physical punishment was: "It depends". It depends on the child's behavior, as mothers indicated that they had to assess the type of behavior, the severity of the act, and the intentionality before considering a spank or slap. Many mothers also mentioned evaluating various situational circumstances before deciding to spank. These include: whether they were in a public setting, whether the child has had a bad day, and whether the mother was in a bad mood. Each of those variables had a suppressing or inhibiting effect on the use of spanking. Some mothers also mentioned they thought about the outcomes of the spank--for example, mothers commented that if they were in a hurry, a spank would create more trouble than it was worth.

A global attitude approach fails to capture any of that rich cognitive activity that is so vital to mothers' decisions about whether or not to use physical punishment. Therefore, a social information processing model was adopted to organize and systematically examine the processes involved in parental selection of responses to misbehavior. The framework used here was developed by Dodge (1986) to understand social cognition and behavior in aggressive boys. The model consists of five processes; three are especially relevant to this topic. The Representation Process involves the interpretation and categorization of the child's misbehavior. The next process is the Response Search Process. This involves the generation of possible responses and the application of response rules. The generation of possible responses is dependent upon the earlier representation process and the parent's knowledge of possible responses. Once one or more responses have been generated, the application of response rules occurs. The major decision rule that emerged in the interview data, was that of suppression ("Do not use physical punishment, when it would otherwise be appropriate, under particular circumstances"). The next component is the Response Decision Process. This involves evaluating the potential consequences of the response or responses generated and estimating the probability of favorable outcomes, including positive and negative outcomes for both parent and child. Finally, after these components have been gone through, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes automatically, there is the Enactment Process or the behavioral response.

What follows is an illustration with an initial study of how I am integrating this social information processing approach together with parental attitudes. To do that, we used a method that I've been developing over the past several years which I call "Computer-Presented Social Situations" (e.g., Holden, 1988; Holden & Ritchie, 1989). The name reveals the two major attributes of the approach: social situations are presented on micro-computers. The interactive

nature of the computer is engaging to the subjects and the use of computer allows for presenting personalized and detailed vignettes in a way that can't be done with paper and pencil, but still allows confidential responses so sensitive questions--like the use of spanking--can be responded to in the absence of an experimenter.

Method

The participants were 55 middle-class, mostly college-educated mothers of 3 to 4-year-old children--the peak age of spanking (Wauchope & Straus, in press). Thirty-one of the children were girls. The mothers operated a computer program which presented, in a random order, 12 common child misbehaviors based on the work of Grusec and Kuczynski (1980). The misbehaviors concerned breaking rules, aggression, taking others' property, and temper tantrums. Six of the situations dealt with common child misbehaviors in public situations (e.g., a temper tantrum at a birthday party, or intentionally disobeying the mother at the mall) and 6 dealt with similar behaviors but occurred in private (e.g., a temper tantrum at home, disobeying the mother at home). (There were no significant differences in ratings of severity of the misbehaviors between the two contexts as assessed by 10 independent raters).

Mothers read on the computer the detailed situation and then responded to 4 questions: How often their children engaged in the misbehavior, and the likelihood that they would use each of three responses--Reasoning, Using a Time-Out, or Using a Physical Punishment. Each of the 3 likelihood questions, presented in a random order, concerned their behavioral intentions (using a 7-pt Likert-type scale). Only the mothers' responses concerning their reported likelihood to use a physical punishment will be presented here.

To assign mothers into attitude groups, we developed a 30-item attitude questionnaire concerning the use of physical punishment, which mothers filled out after operating the computer program. One major subscale comprised of 10 items was identified through factor analysis, which we labelled "General Orientation to Physical Punishment" (e.g., "Spanking is a normal part of parenting"). (The alpha coefficient was .89; a three week test-retest reliability assessment with a sub-sample of 20 mothers was acceptable ($r[20] = .76$, $p < .001$). Based on the mothers' scores, we divided the mothers into three attitude groups: 12 mothers were classified as having Positive attitudes toward physical punishment ($M=47.8$), 30 were Ambivalent ($M=31.7$), and 13 had Negative attitudes ($M=15.2$). These scores differed significantly ($F[2, 48] = 125.26$, $p < .001$), and each group differed reliably from each other as assessed by post-hoc tests (Duncan).

We expected to find main effects for the between-subject variable of attitude group, and for the within-subject variables of Context, Child Misbehavior, and interactions of Attitude group with the within-subject factors.

Results

The likelihood ratings of using a physical punishment were submitted to a 2 (Child's Sex) X 3 (Attitude toward Physical Punishment) X 2 (Context: Private or Public) X 6 (Type of Child Misbehaviors), with repeated measures on the last two factors. For the between-subject factors, there was a main effect for Attitude ($F[2, 49] = 25.12$, $p < .001$), but not sex of child. For the within-subject factors, main effects were found for Context ($F[1, 49] = 6.55$, $p < .01$), Type of Child Misbehavior ($F[5, 45] = 16.88$, $p < .0001$), and interactions between Context and Child Misbehavior ($F[5, 45] = 5.74$, $p < .001$). There were also reliable interactions between Attitude X Type of Child Misbehavior ($F[10, 88] = 2.81$, $p < .01$) and Attitude X Context ($F[2, 49] = 4.41$, $p < .01$).

The overall mean likelihood ratings to use a physical punishment in reaction to the 12 child misbehaviors are displayed in Figure 1. Mean ratings to the six misbehaviors in a PUBLIC setting have been group together on the left of the graph followed by the mean ratings to the six misbehaviors occurring in a PRIVATE setting. The main effect for child misbehavior can be seen, as can the tendency to give higher ratings to the misbehaviors occurring in private (the three highest ratings were all in response to misbehaviors occurring in private). Despite the effect for type of child misbehavior and to a lesser extent, context, there was relatively limited variation.

The reason for that limited variation was because those results are homogenized by failing to account for the pre-existing attitudes toward physical punishment. When the means are divided by groups, a very different story emerges (see Figure 2). No longer do the mean ratings hover around the "somewhat unlikely to use" level. Mothers with negative attitudes showed essentially no variation because, for each misbehavior, they were "Very unlikely to use" (Ms=1.1-2.4). In contrast, the positive attitude mothers had ratings indicating that they were at least "somewhat likely to use" (Ms=2.4-5.7). The Ambivalent group's mean rating, without the exception, fell between the two other groups' ratings (Ms=1.5-5.4).

Given their attitudes toward physical punishment, only one or two individuals from the Negative group entertained the possibility of spanking. Consequently, there was no need for them to have a decision rule of suppression ("Do not use physical punishment in a public setting"). However, for the Ambivalent mothers, the suppression rule could be seen: an average of 24% of the mothers were at least somewhat likely to spank in a public setting (selecting a rating of 5,6, or 7), but in a private setting, the average jumped up to 45% (see Figure 3). The Positive Attitude group were less likely to manifest a suppression rule: 56% of the mothers were atleast somewhat likely to use a physical punishment in Public in contrast to 64% in private. This difference in the likelihood of using a physical punishment between the two contexts was found to be only a trend for the Ambivalent Attitude group ($X^2[1] = 2.70$, $p = .1$).

Discussion

In this initial study, links between a specific attitude and behavior intentions have been identified and we've begun to reveal one of the information processing decisions involved in mothers' reported use of physical punishment as an instrumental behavior. In subsequent work, other parts of Dodge's Social Information Processing model will be examined. These include focusing on variations among parents in: (a) classifying the severity of child misbehaviors; (b) generating possible responses; (c) utilizing the suppression rule; (d) forming different outcome evaluations; and (e) testing how behavioral intentions about physical punishment relate to behavior. Future work will also attempt to identify what personality variables are associated with differences in information processing--such as why some mothers do not use a suppression rule when others do.

To summarize, mothers' behavioral intentions about using physical punishment have been examined to reveal influences operating on their selection of responses to child misbehaviors. It was shown that for most mothers, both the distal variable of attitude toward physical punishment and the proximate variables of immediate considerations need to studied to understand parental behavioral intentions or behavior. If only global attitudes are studied, the considerable variation resulting from proximate considerations (such as the type of misbehavior or the context) is lost and would not be predictive of behavior. If only proximate considerations are studied without accounting for pre-existing attitudes, then the resulting data are misleading and also wouldn't predict behavior. This study has also illustrated that the relationship between distal and proximate variables is not necessarily isomorphic. It was the Ambivalent Attitude group's ratings that were most affected by the context; the Negative Attitude mothers rarely, if ever considered using a physical punishment, and the Positive Attitude mothers showed only limited modulation of their behavioral intentions concerning physical punishment.

This work also illustrates a more general point: Research into parental social cognition must adopt a more multidimensional approach. If we are to fully understand parental behavior, let alone parental social cognition, there is no alternative. And the way to best reveal and understand that complexity is to focus on the information processing that occurs in parental social cognition.

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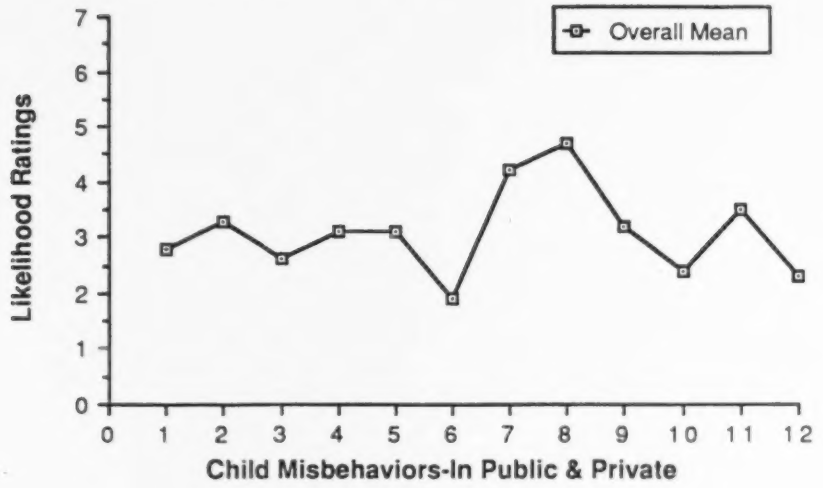

Figure 1. Overall Mean Likelihood Ratings of Using a Physical Punishment

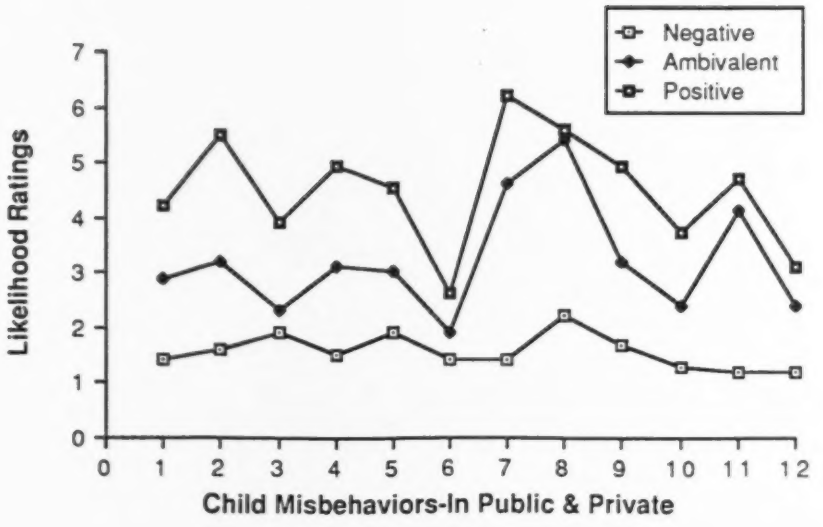

Figure 2. Mean Likelihood Ratings of Using a Physical Punishment by Attitude Group

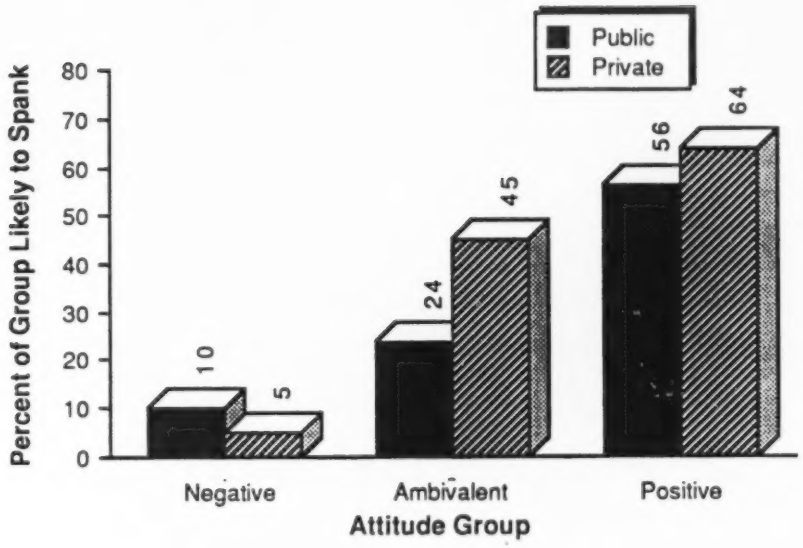

Figure 3. Percent of Each Attitude Group to be atleast Somewhat Likely to use a Physical Punishment, averaged over the Public and Private setting